Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms

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Abstract

This article presents culture as a vehicle of labor market sorting. Providing a case study of hiring in elite professional service firms, I investigate the often suggested but heretofore empirically unexamined hypothesis that cultural similarities between employers and job candidates matter for employers' hiring decisions. Drawing from 120 interviews with employers as well as participant observation of a hiring committee, I argue that hiring is more than just a process of skills sorting; it is also a process of *cultural matching* between candidates, evaluators, and firms. Employers sought candidates who were not only competent but also culturally similar to themselves in terms of leisure pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles. Concerns about shared culture were highly salient to employers and often outweighed concerns about absolute productivity. I unpack the interpersonal processes through which cultural similarities affected candidate evaluation in elite firms and provide the first empirical demonstration that shared culture—particularly in the form of lifestyle markers—matters for employer hiring. I conclude by discussing the implications for scholarship on culture, inequality, and labor markets.

Keywords

cultural capital, culture, hiring, homophily, inequality, interpersonal evaluation, labor markets

Over the past 40 years, there has been considerable debate about the role that culture plays in labor market stratification. On the one hand, status attainment and labor market scholars have portrayed culture as peripheral to occupational sorting (Blau and Duncan 1967; Tilly and Tilly 1998). On the other hand, cultural sociologists contend that culture is an important basis on which valued material and symbolic rewards—including access to desirable jobs and occupations—are distributed (Lareau and Weininger 2003).

Yet, little empirical scholarship investigates the role that culture plays in occupational attainment. One of the most crucial moments in labor market stratification is the decision to hire. As Bills (2003:442) notes,

"Ultimately . . . both attaining an occupational status and securing an income are contingent on a hiring transaction." Although scholars often hypothesize that cultural similarities between employers and job candidates matter for employers' decisions (Lamont 1992), systematic empirical research on the role of culture in hiring is virtually nonexistent (Huffcutt 2011; Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Skaggs 2010).

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Providing a case study of elite professional service firms, I investigate the often suggested but previously untested hypothesis that cultural similarities—defined here as shared tastes, experiences, leisure pursuits, and self-presentation styles (Bourdieu 1984)—between employers and job candidates matter for employers' hiring decisions. I find that hiring is more than just a process of skills sorting; it is also a process of *cultural matching* between candidates, evaluators, and firms. Employers sought candidates who were not only competent but also culturally similar to themselves. Concerns about shared culture were highly salient to employers and often outweighed concerns about productivity alone. I introduce three interpersonal processes through which cultural similarities affected candidate evaluation and provide the first empirical demonstration that shared culture—particularly in the form of lifestyle markers—matters for employer hiring.

HOW EMPLOYERS HIRE

Hiring is a powerful way in which employers shape labor market outcomes. Hiring practices are gatekeeping mechanisms that facilitate career opportunities for some groups, while blocking entry for others. As an entry point to occupations and income brackets, hiring is a critical site of economic stratification and social closure (Elliot and Smith 2004).

Sociologists typically depict employer hiring as a matching process between organizational characteristics, job demands, and applicants' skills (Tilly and Tilly 1998). Although too voluminous to review here (and excellently summarized elsewhere), researchers commonly portray employers' hiring decisions as stemming from estimates of candidates' human capital (i.e., hard and soft skills), social capital (i.e., social connections), and demographic characteristics; residual variance is typically attributed to a combination of discrimination and error (for a review, see Pager and Shepherd 2008). However, despite a surge of research on employers over the past 30 years, our knowledge of hiring

remains incomplete. Even after accounting for measures of applicants' human capital, social capital, and demographic traits, models of employer hiring still exhibit significant unexplained variance. Consequently, much of what drives employer decision-making is still a mystery to scholars (Heckman and Siegelman 1993).

I argue that much of this gap can be attributed to methodological and data limitations. The bulk of sociological research on hiring uses quantitative data on either (1) individuals who enter an organization or (2) pre-hire/post-hire comparisons that are unable to explore how hiring decisions are actually made (Fernandez and Weinberg 1997). Additionally, research is often constrained to easily observable individual-, organizational-, or industry-level information derived from employment records or public data. However, to fully understand how employers hire, it is necessary to study the *process* of decision-making itself, analyzing how employers evaluate, compare, and select new hires. Doing so can reveal more subtle factors that contribute to employers' decisions and can illuminate new mechanisms (Gross 2009) that produce hiring outcomes.

BRINGING CULTURE BACK IN

When studying employer hiring, scholars typically analyze individual, organizational, or institutional factors (Pager and Shepherd 2008). However, hiring involves more than just candidates, companies, and contexts; it is also a fundamentally interpersonal process. Job interviews are crucial components of hiring in many industries; subjective impressions of candidates that employers develop through interviews are strong drivers of hiring decisions, often carrying more weight than candidates' résumé qualifications (Graves and Powell 1995). Still, sociologists typically analyze pre- or post-interview aspects of hiring. In light of this, several scholars have called for more attention to the interpersonal dimensions of hiring (Roscigno 2007; Stainback et al. 2010).

The literature on interpersonal dynamics shows that similarity is one of the most powerful drivers of attraction and evaluation in micro-social settings (Byrne 1971), including job interviews (Huffcutt 2011). Although hiring research has examined similarities in sex and race, similarities in tastes, experiences, leisure pursuits, and self-presentation styles also serve as potent sources of interpersonal attraction and stratification (Lareau and Weininger 2003; Wimmer and Lewis 2010). Seeking out commonalities in knowledge, experience, and interests is typically the first thing two people do upon meeting (Gigone and Hastie 1993). Discovering such similarities serves as a powerful emotional glue that facilitates trust and comfort, generates feelings of excitement, and bonds individuals together (Collins 2004; DiMaggio 1987; Erickson 1996). In fact, the original articulations of the similarity-attraction hypothesis in psychology (Byrne 1971) and the homophily principle in sociology (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954) posited that cultural similarities yield attraction.

However, cultural similarities are more than just sources of liking; they are also fundamental bases on which we evaluate merit (DiMaggio 1987; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Early scholars, including Weber (1958) and Veblen (1899), argued that similarities in leisure pursuits, experiences, self-presentation, and other "lifestyle markers" serve as badges of group membership and bases of inclusion or exclusion from desirable social opportunities. In fact, Weber suggested that lifestyle markers are fundamental bases of status group reproduction and social closure.

Indeed, consciously or not, gatekeepers may use cultural similarities when evaluating others and distributing valued rewards. For example, in a classic study of interviews between college counselors and community college students, Erickson and Schultz (1981) found that establishing similarity was critical for whether a counselor believed a student had potential for future success and delivered a positive recommendation. Co-membership could occur on various lines, but similarities in experience and culture were most crucial. More recently,

Lamont (2009) found that scholars were more likely to recommend proposals for prestigious academic fellowships that were topically similar to their own research interests. Such patterns have implications not only for immediate access to material and social rewards but also for longer term educational, economic, and social trajectories (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985).

Although plentiful, research on culture and stratification disproportionately focuses on investigating shared culture in educational settings (for a review, see Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008). Missing in this literature is an examination of whether shared culture matters after graduation, when students with similar credentials compete for jobs in the labor market. Employer hiring is a particularly clear example of the stratifying power of shared culture. We can see whether students cash in displays of cultural signals for monetary rewards in the form of desirable jobs and salaries; that is, whether cultural similarity has an economic conversion value (Bourdieu 1986) in job markets, a proposition often hypothesized but not yet analyzed empirically (Bills 2003). Given that qualities we use to evaluate others are context specific (Lamont 1992), one cannot assume that shared culture works identically in the classroom as in the interview room; both warrant empirical attention.

Just as cultural sociologists have not yet systematically studied hiring, hiring scholars have under-theorized culture. The majority of sociological research on hiring focuses on how employers estimate applicants' hard skills and, in particular, cognitive skills; studies that look at noncognitive traits most frequently examine those hypothesized to directly affect productivity, such as soft skills (Farkas 2003).[1] Applicants' displays of cultural signals and lifestyle markers are typically classified as nonproductive and thus have received minimal empirical attention (Tilly and Tilly 1998).

Although hiring studies often recognize that similarity is an important driver of candidate selection, research focuses almost exclusively on analyzing similarities in sex or race (Elliot and Smith 2004; Gorman 2005). Part of this focus may be due to data limitations—information

about underlying tastes and experiences can be difficult to obtain, let alone quantify (Stevens 2008). Additionally, scholars often portray demographic similarities as proxies for shared culture. Although culture and structure are mutually reinforcing (Sewell 1992), and structural position, including sex and race, strongly influences the content of one's cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986), considerable variation in values, experience, and behavior exists within demographic groups (Lamont and Small 2008). Consequently, it is necessary to consider not only similarities in demography but also similarities in culture and experience between employers and prospective employees (Turco 2010; Wilson 1997).

Finally, some hiring research assumes that sex and race similarities trump all other commonalities. Although similarities in sex and race are powerful sources of interpersonal attraction and evaluation, over the past 25 years psychologists have confirmed Tajfel and Turner's (1986) hypothesis that in-group and out-group preferences are variable; a robust literature reveals important moderators of demographic in-group preference (see Ely 1995). In hiring, studies of sex and race similarities between employers and applicants show inconsistent effects, ranging from positive to negative to nil (Huffcutt 2011).

In light of this, scholars have called for research analyzing how similarities other than sex and race influence labor market sorting (Castilla 2011).[2] As noted earlier, one particularly powerful source of interpersonal attraction and evaluation is shared culture. Although important in many settings, cultural similarities are likely to be especially important in hiring. Psychologists have shown that perceived similarity helps moderate the effect of actual similarity on attraction. The subjective belief that another is similar to the self on one or more dimensions that the individual values in a particular context is crucial for understanding patterns of interpersonal attraction (Tajfel and Turner 1986).[3] Subjective impressions of similarity are particularly consequential in one-on-one settings where interactions are personalized, enduring, and based on more information than what is visible (Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner

2008), such as in job interviews. In fact, perceived similarity is thought to be *more important* than actual similarity in the decision to hire (Graves and Powell 1995). A critical source of perceived similarity is shared culture (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

Nevertheless, sociological research on hiring typically sidelines shared culture as a basis of employers' decisions. Indeed, there are whispers of cultural similarity in the hiring literature. A small number of qualitative case studies—perhaps most notably Neckerman and Kirschenman's (1991) study of urban employers—hypothesize that shared culture between employers and applicants may shape employers' decisions.[4] DiMaggio (1992:127) even goes so far as to call organizational recruitment a "cultural matching" process. Despite the fact that shared culture between superiors and subordinates is salient for inclusion and exclusion once on the job (Erickson 1996; Roth 2006; Turco 2010), cultural factors are typically bracketed as nonproductive or unobservable in hiring studies and are excluded from analysis (Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009).

To the best of my knowledge, this article presents the first systematic, empirical investigation of whether shared culture between employers and job candidates matters in hiring. Through a case study of elite professional service firms, I seek to (1) extend sociological research on culture and stratification beyond educational settings to the domain of labor markets, and (2) observe what hiring scholars have typically considered unobservable. My goal is not to develop an alternative theory of hiring—cultural similarities certainly work in conjunction with human capital, social capital, and discrimination—but rather to illuminate one important but understudied dimension of hiring, with the aim of more accurately modeling reality from the perspective of employers.

CASE SELECTION
Wall Street versus Main Street

I analyze hiring in elite professional service firms.[5] Although a focus on elite employers

constrains generalizability, it also offers distinct theoretical advantages. First, the majority of hiring studies focus on low-wage or low-skill labor markets. Such analyses are very important, but inequality is driven by privilege as well as disadvantage. To fully understand how employers contribute to economic stratification, it is also necessary to understand entry to highly paid and prestigious job tracks. Analyzing access to elite jobs is particularly important given that the top 10 percent of income earners has disproportionately driven economic inequality in the United States in recent decades (Saez 2008). Because hiring practices tend to be labor-market specific (Bills 2003), they may differ between Wall Street and Main Street; both warrant empirical attention.

Second, elite professional service firms are a fertile ground for analyzing cultural similarities in hiring. Entry-level professional positions typically require a prestigious university credential, and these employers solicit the majority of applications directly through university career centers rather than through informal networks. Applicant pools are thus pre-screened, minimizing many traditional structural and status differences between applicants. Studying this labor market thus provides unique opportunities to analyze cultural similarities between job applicants and evaluators in the absence of stark differences in applicants' human or social capital.

Third, elite employers are a particularly fruitful case for examining cultural similarities in hiring. Cultural qualities tend to be more salient in settings where differences in quality are minimized (Lamont 2009) and among elites (Lamont 1992). Thus, even if focusing on elite employers is less generalizable, it allows for analysis of culture under the microscope. Although a focus on elites may magnify the relative importance of cultural similarities in hiring, it can also reveal important insights about the role of shared culture in hiring at a level of granularity that may be inaccessible in other settings.

Elite Professional Service Firms

I analyze hiring for entry-level professional positions in elite investment banks, law firms,

Table 1. Typical Entry-Level Compensation by Field and Degree

	First Year Total Annual Compensation[a]
Law Firm	
JD	$175–330K[b]
Investment Bank	
BA	$70–150K
MBA/JD/PhD	$150–350K
Consulting Firm	
BA	$70–100K
MBA/JD/PhD	$135–200K

Sources: Management Consulted (2012); National Association of Legal Professionals (2011); Wall Street Oasis (2012)
[a]Starting salaries are standardized by firm and do not vary by a candidate's alma mater, grades, or prior work experience. These figures include base salary, annual performance bonus, and signing bonuses; they exclude relocation expense bonuses, which vary by firm.
[b]Only one law firm matches employees' base salary in bonus; most firms are closer to the lower end of this range.

and management consulting firms. These firms share important similarities.

Rewards. Jobs in these firms hold unparalleled economic rewards for young employees. Joining one of these firms catapults recent graduates into the top 10 percent of household incomes in the United States (see Table 1). These salaries are double to quadruple amounts earned by graduates from the same universities entering other jobs in the same year (Guren and Sherman 2008; Zimmerman 2009). Additionally, because jobs early in the life course play a critical role in shaping future economic and occupational trajectories (Blau and Duncan 1967), and doing time within these firms is increasingly required for senior positions within the government and nonprofit sectors as well as other corporations (Kalfayan 2009), these jobs can be thought of as contemporary gateways to the U.S. economic elite. Consequently, the stakes for applicants are high.

Work. Entry-level professionals execute a combination of research, teamwork, and client

interaction; analytic and interpersonal skills are key job requirements. Across firm type, professionals work with similar (if not the exact same) clients, usually large corporations. Professionals face tight deadlines and highly demanding work schedules (65+ hours per week).

Recruitment. Firms hire the bulk of new professional employees through annual, on-campus recruitment programs operated with career-services offices at elite universities. Firms seek to create an incoming class of new hires that enter the firm as a group and undergo intensive on-the-job training and professional socialization together. Firms identify a set of universities—typically through national prestige rankings—where they accept résumés and interview candidates. At these campuses, any student may apply. Competition is largely closed to students who do not attend prestigious schools (Rivera 2011). After an initial résumé screen,[6] usually based on a grade floor and extracurriculars, firms choose a subgroup of applicants for first-round interviews where applicants meet with one or two employees for 20 to 45 minutes. Firms typically interview dozens of candidates from a single school back-to-back in a campus career center or nearby hotel. It is crucial to note that candidates are interviewed by revenue-generating professionals (rather than human resources [HR] representatives) who have undergone minimal training in interviewing and could potentially work closely with candidates hired. Applicants who receive favorable evaluations in first-round interviews participate in a final round of three to six back-to-back interviews either on campus or in the firm's office. Recruiting committees typically weigh interviews more heavily than résumés in final offer decisions.

Candidates. These firms attract similar applicant pools. The majority of students at top-tier undergraduate and professional schools apply for these jobs.[7] Elite undergraduates frequently debate between entering banking, consulting, or law school upon graduation; business school and law school students often apply simultaneously to banks

and consulting firms; and newly minted JDs increasingly seek employment in banks and consulting firms (Leonhardt 2011; Rimer 2008).

Despite these similarities, these firms also display differences, enabling consideration of sources of variation in hiring evaluations.

Work. Although work in all settings entails similar skills, new consultants generally have the greatest amount of teamwork and client contact; new lawyers have the least. Additionally, consulting and investment banking entail more quantitative analysis than does law. Such differences can illuminate links between job requirements and the role of cultural similarity in hiring.

Interview format. Law firm interviews focus exclusively on testing candidates' interpersonal skills through informal conversation. Banks follow a similar format but also test candidates' basic familiarity with financial principles. Although such probes are typically rudimentary (e.g., "What is NASDAQ?" "How do you value a company?"), they incorporate a basic level of job-relevant knowledge into interviews. Consulting firms employ the most technical evaluations, consisting of a brief conversational interview, similar to those in banks and law firms, followed by a 20- to 30-minute case in which interviewers describe a hypothetical business problem and ask applicants to talk about how they might solve it. Such variation enables analysis of whether there are links between interview formats and the role of cultural similarity in hiring.

METHODS

To investigate the role of cultural similarity in hiring, I conducted interviews and participant observation. Because this article focuses on the evaluation process and evaluators' subjective impressions of candidates, I draw heavily from the interviews—which are particularly suited to the study of subjective interpretations and social processes (Yin 2003)—but use fieldwork to supplement participants' narratives.

Interviews

From 2006 to 2008, I conducted 120 interviews with professionals involved in undergraduate and graduate hiring in top-tier firms[8] (40 per industry). Participants included hiring partners, managing directors, mid-level employees who conduct interviews and screen résumés, and HR managers. I recruited participants through stratified sampling from public directories of recruiting contacts, university alumni directories, and multi-sited referral chains (see Part I, section C, in the online supplement [http://asr.sagepub.com/supplemental]). Because elite populations are often difficult to access, referrals and my university and prior corporate affiliations were helpful in gaining consent and building rapport with participants. Interviews lasted 40 to 90 minutes, took place at the time and location of participants' choosing, and were tape-recorded and transcribed word-for-word when participants consented. Following Lamont's (2009) protocol for probing evaluative criteria, I asked evaluators specific questions about the qualities they looked for and about recent interviewees. Additionally, I asked evaluators who screened résumés to verbally evaluate a set of mock candidate résumés. I constructed résumés that were somewhat standard for these firms—all had attended selective universities, met firms' grade floor, and were involved in extracurriculars. The mock candidates, however, varied by sex, ethnicity, educational prestige, GPA, prior employer, and extracurriculars (see Part V in the online supplement). Because more than one characteristic varied between résumés, profiles were not intended to be an experimental manipulation but rather a launching point for discussion to illuminate processes of evaluation in real time.

Qualitative research is a social endeavor, so it is possible that my identity influenced the tone of interviews. I am an Ivy League-educated female from a mixed ethno-religious background, which may have primed respondents to emphasize high-status cultural practices (which they did) and favor diversity (which they did not).

Participant Observation

Over nine months in 2006 and 2007, I conducted fieldwork within the recruiting department of one elite professional service firm, which I refer to by the pseudonym Holt Halliday, or simply Holt. My role was that of a participant observer. Given my prior professional experience, I was brought on through a personal connection as an unpaid "recruiting intern" to help execute recruitment events. In exchange, Holt granted me permission to observe its recruitment process for research purposes. During these months, I shadowed evaluators through full-time and summer associate recruitment from an elite professional school. Due to institutional review board (IRB) restrictions and Holt's request, I was unable to sit in on interviews. However, I attended recruitment events, interacted with candidates, debriefed evaluators about candidates after interviews, and sat in on group deliberations where candidates were discussed and ultimately selected.[9] In addition to informing my interview protocol, such observation enabled examination of candidate selection in action and could reveal patterns outside the awareness of evaluators. Although I did not observe interviews directly, witnessing how employers discussed candidates and ultimately made decisions behind closed doors provided crucial insights into the hiring process. How we interpret events plays a critical role in orienting action (Turner and Stets 2006). Similarly, evaluators record *subjective impressions*—not objective details—of interactions on written interview reports and use these narratives to argue for or against candidates in hiring committee deliberations. These subjective impressions are the most important determinant of interview evaluations (Graves and Powell 1995). Although I observed only one firm, these data represent a starting point for understanding basic features of the hiring process.

Data Analysis

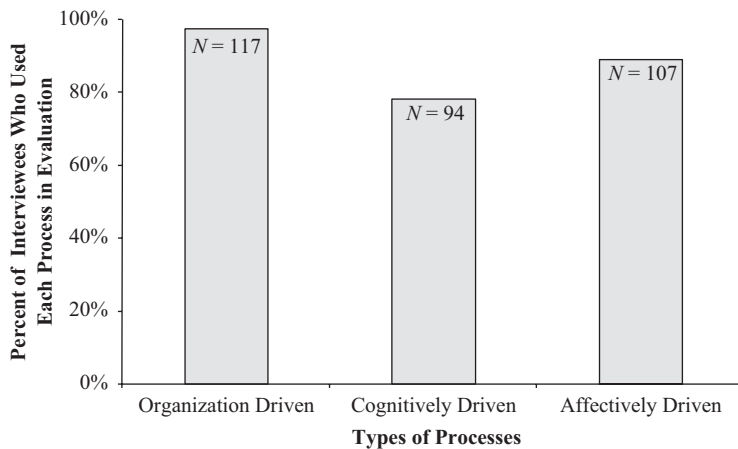I developed coding categories inductively and refined them in tandem with data analysis

Figure 1. Relative Prevalence of the Processes through Which Cultural Similarities Affected Candidate Evaluation (*N* = 120)
Note: The graph refers to the percent of participants who spontaneously used cultural similarity in a particular way when evaluating any candidate (i.e., recently interviewed, ideal, or mock profile) in research interviews.

(Charmaz 2001). In primary coding rounds, I coded mentions of any criteria or process participants used to evaluate candidates in my interview transcripts and field notes. I did not set out to analyze cultural similarities. In fact, I originally intended to study gender in hiring. However, after noticing the high frequency with which employers used similarity as a basis of evaluation, I developed secondary codes to capture the role of similarity in hiring, specifically codes referring to (1) types of similarities employers used in evaluation, (2) meanings employers attributed to particular similarities, and (3) how employers used similarities in evaluation. I followed a similar procedure to code instances when similarities (or a lack thereof) inhibited evaluation. Next, I compared evaluators' biographic and demographic information obtained in conversations with their discussions of the relative importance of particular qualities for points of concordance and discordance. Finally, I quantified and compared code frequencies using the data analysis software ATLAS.ti.

HIRING AS CULTURAL MATCHING

Cultural similarities were highly salient to employers in hiring. Perhaps surprisingly,

similarity was the most common mechanism employers used to assess applicants at the job interview stage.[10] Similarities in extracurricular/leisure pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles were most commonly used. I argue that cultural similarities affected candidate evaluation through three processes: (1) organizational processes encouraging selection on *cultural fit*; (2) cognitive processes, whereby similarities contributed to greater understanding and valuation of candidates' qualifications; and (3) affective processes, whereby similarities generated excitement and increased the likelihood that evaluators would fight for candidates in deliberations. As illustrated in Figure 1, organizational processes were most prevalent.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES: FITTING IN AS FORMAL CRITERION

In these firms, cultural similarity is a formal evaluative criterion structured into candidate screening and selection. Law firm partner Omar[11] (black, male) explained, "In our new associates, we are first and foremost looking for *cultural compatibility*. Someone who . . . will *fit in*." This notion of *cultural fit*,[12] or

perceived similarity to a firm's existing employee base in leisure pursuits, background, and self-presentation, was a key driver of evaluation across firms. Evaluators described fit as being one of the three most important criteria they used to assess candidates in job interviews; more than half reported it was the most important criterion at the job interview stage, rating fit over analytical thinking and communication.[13] Although this number may seem high, firms mandated that evaluators assess candidates' fit along with a variety of technical and communication skills in résumé screens and first- and second-round job interviews. Consequently, even evaluators who weren't personally fond of fit, like consultant Priya (Indian, female), frequently reported using it in assessment. Priya explained, "I don't think [fit] should be [a consideration] at all, it seems to me a very [*shakes her head*] American thing. But it's what [firms] want, so it's what you do."

Management scholars have discussed the benefits of hiring based on matches between candidates' skills and those required by jobs (Cable and Judge 1997). Additionally, following the cultural turn in management, many employers use organizational culture as a way of motivating employees. Strong cultures are often seen as enhancing organizations' productivity, profitability, and creativity (Barley and Kunda 1992). Consequently, some scholars advocate selecting new hires based on fit between an organization's culture—defined as the shared values that delineate appropriate workplace behavior—and applicants' stable personality traits (e.g., extroversion versus introversion) and work values (e.g., a preference for independent versus collaborative work).[14] Such matches can enhance employee satisfaction, performance, and retention (Chatman 1991).

However, the notion of fit evaluators in this study used differs from this conception because here it typically referred to individuals' play styles—how applicants preferred to conduct themselves *outside* the office—rather than their work styles. Moreover, evaluators distinguished fit from the communication skills required in client-facing professions, which they grouped into the separate category of "polish" or "presence." Consultant Eugene (Asian American, male) fleshed out the distinction between fit and client skills:

> When you are judging someone [to see] if you want to put him in front of a client, the question is do they conduct themselves professionally. . . . You need someone who speaks in a way that earns your trust, who presents their opinion respectfully but also convincingly. . . . But in terms of "fit," it's someone that we want on our case team. . . . You want someone that makes you feel comfortable, that you enjoy hanging out with, can maintain a cool head when times are tough and make tough times kind of fun.

Moreover, unlike fit, evaluators believed client skills could be taught or "coached."

Why did evaluators and firms prioritize cultural fit? When explaining the importance of fit to me, evaluators cited the time-intensive nature of their work. With the long hours spent in the office or on the road, they saw having culturally similar colleagues as making rigorous work weeks more enjoyable, although not necessarily more productive or successful. Law firm partner Vivian (white, female) explained, "When I hire an associate, what I want to know is, is this person someone I could be sitting across the table from at 2 a.m. when trying to get a brief done?" Because of hefty time commitments, co-workers often by default became an employee's primary social network. Consequently, evaluators at all levels of seniority reported wanting to hire individuals who would not only be competent colleagues but also held the potential to be playmates or even friends. Consultant Lance (Asian American, male) described this position:

> It seems like we're *always* at work. We work nights; we work weekends; we are pretty much in the office or traveling. It's way more fun if the people around you are your friends. So, when I'm interviewing, I look

for people . . . I'd want to get to know and want to spend time with, even outside of work . . . people I can be buddies with.

Additionally, evaluators frequently perceived work in their firms as requiring only minimal specialized skills; they commonly described their work as "not rocket science" and cited the extensive training given to new hires as minimizing the importance of prior technical knowledge for job success. Therefore, once candidates passed an initial screen, most commonly based on educational prestige, fit was typically given more weight than grades, coursework, or work experience even in first-round interviews. Banker Nicholae (white, male) explained his justification for emphasizing fit:

> A lot of this job is attitude, not aptitude . . . fit is really important. You know, you will see more of your co-workers than your wife, your kids, your friends, and even your family. So you can be the smartest guy ever, but I don't care. I need to be comfortable working everyday with you, then getting stuck in an airport with you, and then going for a beer after. You need chemistry. Not only that the person is smart, but that you *like* him.

Consequently, evaluators saw selecting culturally similar candidates as a way to increase their personal enjoyment at work.

Even so, recall that fit was not merely a personalized criterion but also a formal one embedded in official recruitment policies. When asked to describe why fit was formally structured into candidate evaluation, participants most often discussed the concept in relation to retention. These firms experience significant turnover. Most new hires will leave within four years of being hired; a significant proportion will leave after only two years. This attrition is structured into the promotion systems of many elite professional service firms. Many employees opt-out, though, seeking jobs in other firms or industries that exhibit better work-life balance, more

intellectually stimulating work, or, in the case of hedge funds and private equity firms, greater financial rewards. Firms thus try to minimize attrition by using fit as a selection tool. Culturally similar candidates were perceived as more likely to enjoy their jobs, be enjoyed by their co-workers, and stay longer. Banking director Mark (white, male) confessed, "We try to *hedge our bets*. Through the recruiting process, we want to find those people . . . who will fit in so that once they get here, they will not leave." In the face of high turnover, employers also saw creating a tight-knit workplace of like-minded people as a selling point to keep attracting new applicants. Annual recruitment presentations held on elite campuses to solicit applications emphasized that new employees would not just enter a prestigious, lucrative career track but also acquire—in the words of a Holt managing partner in his address to a packed hotel ballroom during one presentation I observed— a "lifelong network of close friends."

MEASURING CULTURAL FIT

Employers strongly emphasized selecting candidates who were culturally similar to existing employees. But precisely how did they evaluate fit? In this section, I discuss the two most common methods.

Cultural Similarity to Firm

A majority of evaluators described firms as having not only particular organizational cultures (e.g., interdependent versus independent) but also distinct *personalities*, derived from the typical extracurricular interests and self-presentation styles of their employees. They contrasted "sporty" and "fratty" firms with those that were "egghead" or "intellectual." Some companies were "white-shoe" or "country club," while others were "gruff" or "scrappy." Evaluators who believed a common personality characterized employees in their firm frequently looked for candidates who fit this image. Consulting partner Grace (white, female) said, "We want people who fit

not only the way we do things but *who we are.*" Although HR managers emphasized that achieving gender and racial heterogeneity were recruiting priorities, and elite professional service firms devote significant resources to increasing the demographic diversity of applicant pools (Rivera 2012), HR managers believed that achieving a baseline of cultural similarity represented a recruitment success. Law firm hiring manager Judy (white, female) boasted:

> We have a weekend getaway for our new summer associates their first week here. When one of our summers got back the next week, he said to me, "We're all so different in our different ways but you can tell we were all recruited to come to [FIRM] because we all have the same personalities. It's clear like we're all the same kind of people."

In essence, firms sought surface-level (i.e., demographic) diversity in applicant pools but deep-level (i.e., cultural) homogeneity in new hires (Phillips, Northcraft, and Neale 2006).[15]

Although firms already constrain applicants' cultural characteristics by restricting on-campus recruiting to elite universities (Stevens 2007), evaluators further screened résumés based on the presence or absence of similarities in extracurricular interests between applicants and firm employees. When applying to these firms via on-campus recruiting, students must follow a standardized résumé format that lists not only educational and work experiences but also formal and informal extracurricular pursuits. Whether someone rock climbs, plays the cello, or enjoys *film noir* may seem trivial to outsiders, but these leisure pursuits were crucial for assessing whether someone was a cultural fit. In the face of large volumes of candidates with decent grades at prestigious schools, firms used such "fine distinctions" (Stevens 2007) to screen résumés and compile interview pools.[16] For example, legal hiring manager Mary (white, female) rejected mock candidate Blake, who had grades that met her "scrappy" firm's grade floor and relevant work experience (which is rare for law students), based on perceived extracurricular misfit. In a noticeable regional accent, she said, "I'm looking at the interests [on his résumé]—lacrosse, squash, crew [*laughs*]. I'm sort of giving him a personality type here, and I don't think he's going to fit in well here . . . we're more rough and tumble. . . . I'm going to let him go." Just as these sports were seen as a deterrent to fit in her firm, these same activities were seen as evidence of a match in others. For example, "white-shoe" investment bank HR manager Kelly (white, female), dressed in a buttoned, pastel cardigan and pearls, asserted, "I'd have to pick Blake and Sarah. With his lacrosse and her squash, they'd really get along . . . on the trading floor." There was even a firm for people who lacked "personality" as defined by extracurricular pursuits. Monotone-sounding attorney Paul (white, male) explained, "We don't really like people here to have outside interests. We're kind of a *boring* firm in that way. So, honestly, when I see people who have a lot of activities on their résumé, or if they seem to have a really strong passion for something outside of work, I'll usually take a pass because it's not going to be a good fit."

In addition to influencing résumé screens, perceptions of fit via similarity to firm employees also affected interview evaluations, as I observed first-hand at Holt. When arguing against inviting a candidate (white, male) back for a second-round interview, manager Hans (white, male) explained, "He did well on the case and was very articulate. He's a very interesting guy with a good story. But I think he's too *intellectual* for [FIRM]. You know, he is very into 18th-century literature and avant-garde film. . . . [*sighed*] I don't think he'd be a good fit." The candidate was not invited back. Interviewers also rejected candidates whom they perceived as more similar to the self-presentation style of other firms. For example, to justify his decision for rejecting one candidate (white, male), manager Mayank (Indian American, male) said matter-of-factly, "He's very gregarious . . .

kind of a frat boy . . . I think he's more of a [FIRM] person." Evaluators thus selected candidates who fit the extracurriculars and self-presentation styles typical of a firm's employees.

Cultural Similarity to Self

A second way evaluators assessed fit was by using the self as a proxy. The logic underlying this method of evaluating fit was that an evaluator represented the firm and its personality. If an applicant fit with the evaluator, then the applicant would fit with other employees. Attorney Carlos (Hispanic, male) explained, "You . . . use yourself to measure [fit] because that's all you have to go on." Whereas measuring fit by the degree of similarity between candidates' lifestyle markers and firm personality was more common in résumé screens, using the self as proxy was more common in first- and second-round interviews.

Evaluators likened ascertaining fit in interviews to selecting romantic partners. Attorney Beverley (white, female) explained, "The best way I could describe it is like if you were on a date. You kind of *know* when there's a match." In addition to intangible feelings of "match," roughly four-fifths of evaluators used a heuristic known as the "airplane test," which HR often endorsed. Evaluators drew from a wide array of airports and flight interruption imagery in describing this test, but investment banking director Max (white, male) expressed its essence:

> One of my main criteria is what I call the "stranded in the airport test." Would I want to be stuck in an airport in Minneapolis in a snowstorm with them? And if I'm on a business trip for two days and I have to have dinner with them, is it the kind of person I enjoy hanging with? And you also have to have some basic criteria, skills and smarts or whatever, but you know, but if they meet that test, it's most important for me.

Similarity was not always a prerequisite for feelings of fit between an applicant and interviewer. However, in line with research on the role of similarity in attraction (Byrne 1971), finding common experiences stimulated the feelings of "match" and "chemistry" evaluators described as essential components of fit in interviews. Attorney Denise (white, female) explained, "I really do think it's about finding . . . something in common with your interviewer."

Evaluators often assessed fit through icebreaking chitchat during the first minutes of interviews. They described beginning interviews by scanning résumés for shared experiences to discuss. As attorney Jamie (white, female) illustrated, they typically sought extracurricular or extraprofessional similarities: "I usually try to start with something not related to law school. I take a quick look at their [extracurricular] activities to see what's there. I usually try to pick something that I find interesting . . . that I can relate to or that I know something about." Some interviewers, like attorney Carlos, explicitly sought biographic commonalities:

> I usually start an interview by saying, "Tell me about yourself." When I get asked that, I talk about where I'm from, where I was raised, and then my background. A not-good way to start is with law school. I want to hear your *life story*. Hopefully there's something more interesting about your life than deciding to go to law school. . . . When they tell me about their background, it's easier to find things in common. . . . Maybe . . . they're from Seattle and I've been to Seattle. We can talk about that and develop a connection.

When the presence or absence of a one-on-one match was unclear via informal conversation, some, like banker Oliver (white, male), asked targeted probes:

> If I didn't get a good feel through the interview, I'll ask a bunch of broad-based personal questions like, "What do you like to do?" And hopefully I'm not getting the *coined* answer, "Oh! I like to you know pick
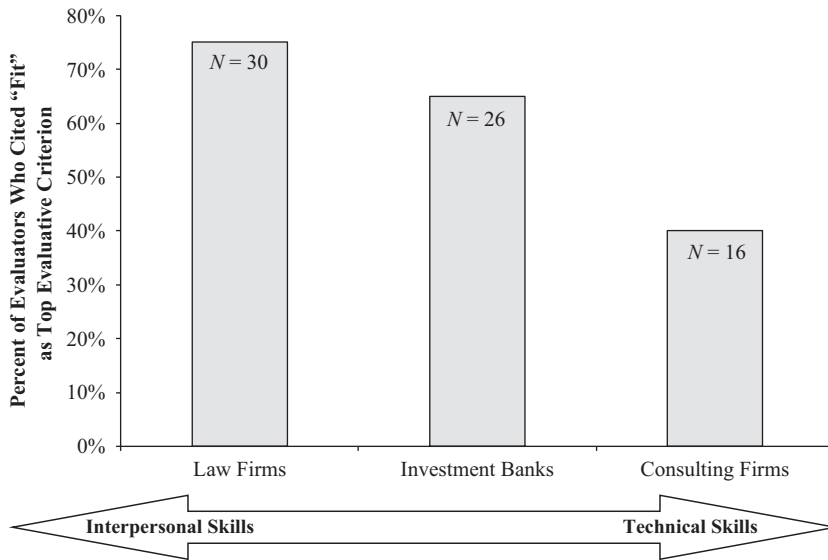
Figure 2. Percentage of Evaluators Who Ranked Fit as Their Most Important Criteria in Job Interviews by Firm Type (*N* = 120)
Note: These numbers correspond to the percent of evaluators in each type of firm who—in research interviews—ranked fit as the most important criterion they use to assess applicants in job interviews. Evaluators were asked to describe the specific criteria they use to assess candidates in interviews. I then asked them to force-rank the criteria they had mentioned.

stocks or read finance books." For me, it's more like, "Oh! You know, I like to scuba dive or hike." . . . Or I'll ask, "Do you follow your school's basketball team?" . . . "Where did you grow up? Did you play any sports in high school?" Just things that try to get a feeling for somebody to see if you have a connection.

To summarize, in interviews evaluators typically selected candidates who fit their own extracurricular and extraprofessional experiences.

Who Put Fit First?

Although fit was highly salient across settings, its relative weight in evaluation varied by firm type. Figure 2 compares percentages of evaluators by firm type who, when asked to force-rank the criteria they use to evaluate candidates in order of importance, ranked fit first. Interestingly, the emphasis on fit *did not* increase with the client- or team-facing demands of the job; fit was

least important in consulting, where work is most interpersonally focused, and it was most important in law, which has the least interpersonal demands during the first years on the job. Use of cultural fit is thus not purely an artifact of a job's social demands.

In line with research suggesting that structured interview formats can reduce subjectivity in evaluation (Reskin and McBrier 2000), however, the importance of fit decreased with the inclusion of technical questions in interviews. In consulting, using case-based business questions provided evaluators with bases to assess candidates other than cultural similarity. Naveen (Indian, male) explained, "Even if someone's a perfect fit, if they absolutely bombed the case, they're out." However, due to the widespread belief—supported by firms' policies—that the ideal worker (Acker 1990; Turco 2010) is not only competent but also culturally similar, case interviews reduced but did not eliminate the use of cultural fit in hiring; 40 percent of consultants still ranked fit first. Manager Kai (white,

male) described the tension between case performance and fit: "It's like air versus water, you really need both." Once candidates demonstrated a baseline of competence, perceptions of fit rather than absolute case performance routinely drove assessments. Manager Perry (white, male) recalled one instance: "On the fit side, I wrote [on the evaluation form] . . . 'Will quickly become everyone's best friend.' . . . That's what I call a good fit. But quite frankly, his case performance wasn't the best. But because his personality and presence were so strong, I forwarded him on [to second-round interviews]." Both interview format and conceptions of the ideal candidate therefore influenced to what degree evaluators prioritized cultural similarity in evaluation.

COGNITIVE PROCESSES: LOOKING-GLASS MERIT

In addition to selection on cultural fit, cultural similarities between interviewers and applicants affected evaluation by facilitating greater comprehension and valuation of candidates' qualifications. Similarities in experience could result in informational advantages unavailable to evaluators with different backgrounds.[17] Banker Jason (white, male) described how experiential similarity could provide a greater quantity and quality of data to assess candidates:

> He was an "ethics, politics, and economics" major. Although I'm sure other people would be like "What the hell?" and assume it's a cushy major and discount his GPA, because I went to Yale and had a lot of friends who did it, I know it's actually one of the toughest and most competitive majors.

Jason rated the candidate highly and forwarded him on to second-round interviews. Conversely, experiential dissimilarities could result in informational disadvantages. Consultant and Ivy-grad Logan (white, male) described difficulties he faced when evaluating students from non-Ivy League schools: "I

just don't know how tough it is to get in to those places and how hard it is to do well there." Similar processes were at play for applicants with work experience outside "blue chip" companies, which were most familiar to evaluators. Banker Aaron (white, male) explained:

> From going through the recruiting process myself and from my friends . . . I have a blueprint in my head of what it's like to work at the major companies—not only at a bank but at a consulting firm or a Google. You know, what the commitment is and what the normal career progression is. . . . With a small firm that I've never heard of, it's just harder to know. Did the person do what's on their résumé? Were they at home at 5 p.m. every day?

Such sentiments support research suggesting that people experience greater facility processing persons and objects that conform to familiar categories and penalize individuals who deviate from them (Zuckerman 1999).

Yet, net of the quantity or quality of information evaluators had to assess candidates, similarity tended to yield more positive perceptions of candidates' abilities. Evaluators used their personal experiences as frames through which they interpreted candidates' intellectual, social, and moral worth. However, in contrast to prior sociological accounts of identity in evaluation—in which individuals unconsciously gravitate toward people similar to themselves (Lamont 2009)—the use of similarity to the self was commonly *active* and *intentional*. In the absence of concrete answers to interview questions and reliable predictors of future performance, assessors purposefully used their own experiences as models of merit, believing that because they had been at least somewhat successful in their careers, candidates who were experientially similar to them would have a higher likelihood of job success. Essentially, they constructed merit in a manner that validated their own strengths and experiences and perceived similar candidates as better applicants.

Employers' own experiences influenced which qualities they emphasized or discounted. For example, evaluators who received high grades in undergraduate or graduate school discussed the importance of grades as selection devices; those who received less stellar marks tended to discount them. In either case, evaluators believed experiences similar to their own were better experiences. Attorney Andrea (white, female) explained why she, despite her firm's official grade policy, overlooks grades:

> My first year grades were all over the place. September 11 happened and I was burnt out from undergrad; I just met my husband and was hanging out with him all the time. So, school wasn't my top priority. But I have been a good lawyer. I know I am smart. So, I think grades are really just there to confirm my personality impression.

Such beliefs about the validity and reliability of evaluative criteria, entrenched in employers' own experiences, were particularly meaningful for evaluations of candidates who deviated from traditional firm standards. Candidates who might otherwise have been rejected could be given a chance or even an edge in evaluation when paired with similar evaluators who believed in the validity of their experiences. For example, attorney Nicole (white, female) who was at the top of her class at a less prestigious law school described why she, unlike the vast majority of interviewers at her firm who came from elite schools, does not disregard applicants who earn top grades at non-top-10 institutions:

> The people that were the top of my class, we came in the first day at school [and] we had to work our butts off; every single one of our exams was closed book, whereas at . . . NYU, all of their exams are open book . . . the curriculum is pretty much the same [as at NYU], the professors are pretty much the same . . . the exams are pretty much the same . . . I do think that the top of my class at New York Law School can compete just

as well as the top of the class in any other law school.

Evaluators' experiences influenced not only which criteria they used to assess candidates but also how they defined and measured merit within a given domain. For example, all firms instructed evaluators to ascertain candidates' drive or ambition, most commonly through leadership positions in extracurricular organizations. However, without clear standards for evaluating this abstract quality, evaluators' personal experiences colored what they counted as quality engagement outside of the classroom. For example, former college athletes typically prized participation in varsity sports above all other types of involvement. Consultant and former athlete Jake (white, male) illustrated such tendencies when selecting between mock candidate profiles:

> I know less, admittedly, about sort of being an editor-in-chief or being a president of a club than I do about athletics. So I'm frankly not sure if these titles are as outstanding as the two athletes are. I don't think that they are, just from what I know about . . . what it takes to be a Division I athlete and what it takes to be a truly exceptional Division I athlete. You know I have some sort of notion of the kind of time and commitment that takes. So, these leadership qualities are excellent but they are not as *impressive* to me as those two athletes.

He ranked the two athletes—Sarah and Blake—first and second, respectively, and declined to interview the nonathletes who had higher grades from more prestigious schools and relevant work experience. Conversely, nonathletes were quick to highlight the value of nonathletic leisure pursuits. Similarly, firms sought candidates who demonstrated "interest" in their firm, as interpreted by their interviewer. Evaluators often measured this subjective quality by whether a candidate's stated rationale for selecting a firm matched their own. Consultant Howard (Asian American, male) described a recent interviewee who scored well on the criterion of interest: "When

I asked about her interest in [FIRM], she presented answers that I would give, actually. She went through the same thought process that I went through when I was choosing."

Evaluators used themselves as models of merit not only when assessing soft skills and intangibles but also when estimating hard skills. For example, in consulting and banking, evaluators who came from finance or engineering reported preferring candidates with similar backgrounds because they believed that such experience constituted superior preparation for the job. The converse was true for evaluators outside these fields. Consultant Karen (white, female) remarked:

> When we're discussing candidates, there's almost always some quant guy who wants to ding any candidate who studied anything but econ or math. But I came from a touchy, feely major and have done just fine. I even think that having a broader background can help people understand clients better and be more creative and flexible. So, if I see you're a history major, it can actually be a plus.

Even in more structured consulting case interviews, evaluators favored candidates who demonstrated a similar response style. Consulting director Natalie (white, female) said:

> I'm definitely an intuitive person, so I can generally . . . come up with the right answer really fast. But it takes me personally longer to do the math behind it. Some people do the math like this [*she snaps*] and then can't figure out what the answer is. . . . I think you need both of those types of people in your firm. But I think the people who are interviewing who have that awesome, super-fast math ability want the math people in the firm. And I think that people who have that more intuitive approach want the intuitive people in the firm. People like the ones who are more like them.

Consequently, culturally similar applicants not only benefited from heightened perceptions of fit but also more favorable perceptions of ability, as evaluators actively constructed and assessed merit in their own image. Banking recruiting head Stephanie (white, female) summarized, "You are basically hiring yourself. This is not an objective process."

AFFECTIVE PROCESSES: SEARCHING FOR A SPARK

Finally, cultural similarities affected hiring evaluations through affective processes. People experience positive feelings when interacting with others who validate their attitudes and identities (Turner and Stets 2006). Banker Fernando (Hispanic, male) provided a lay understanding of this phenomenon when he confessed, "I just think human nature is one that you tend to gravitate towards those people that validate you the most." Although affective processes are difficult to study outside of laboratory settings, I argue that similarities produced affective benefits observable here: similarities could provide evaluators with feelings of excitement that provided advantages in evaluation. Banker Sandeep (Indian, male) illustrated how shared experiences could yield excitement prior to interviews when evaluating mock candidate Sarah. Scanning the résumé, his face lit up as he saw Sarah's extracurricular pursuits. "She plays squash. Anyone who plays squash I love," he said smiling, and immediately ranked her first. Conversely, a lack of commonalities could foster feelings of apathy or aversion before an interview began. When evaluating the same résumé, consulting director Natalie, whose background was in public service, wrinkled her nose and said, "I don't know. I'm personally not interested in commodity sales. [*Shrugs*] I just don't have that much to talk to her about." She declined to interview Sarah. Commonalities also provided "sparks" of excitement during interviews. Banker Arielle (white, female) recalled her best recent interviewee: "She and I both ran the New York marathon . . . we talked about that and hit it off . . . we started talking about how we both love stalking celebrities in New York . . . we had this instant connection. . . . I loved her."

Additionally, affective sparks could color perceptions of other evaluative criteria. Interviewers described feelings of excitement as a critical component of the chemistry that was a prerequisite for fit. Moreover, they often perceived the ability to immediately strike up an exciting, effortless conversation based on shared interests as a proxy for client skills. Banker Christopher (white, male) explained: "You just hit it off with them. And you feel like they can hit it off with anybody."

Feelings of excitement could color assessments of hard skills. Psychologists have shown that individuals experiencing positive feelings such as excitement overweight other people's strengths in evaluation and discount their weaknesses. Conversely, individuals experiencing negative feelings such as boredom or disappointment exaggerate others' weaknesses and discount their strengths. Moreover, people use their feelings as measures of quality, assuming that people who make them feel good *are* good (for a review, see Clore and Storbeck 2006). Beyond such well-documented biases in decision-making, a handful of interviewers admitted they would, on occasion, consciously lower the technical bar for candidates with whom they had a great spark. Banker Max said, "You know, if I'm really hitting it off with them, I won't give them the numbers because I don't want to see them flounder. I want to be able to go back and say, 'Things went well' and pass them on."

The stratifying power of affective boosts yielded by cultural similarity was most evident in post-interview deliberations. Feelings of excitement compel individuals to action (Collins 2004). In hiring, the level of excitement evaluators felt about candidates influenced their willingness to advocate for them in group deliberations. Because of the large number of interviewees, candidates needed to have a champion—an evaluator who would fight for them in deliberations—to receive a job offer. When describing this role to me, participants frequently used the language of love; a candidate had to get them "riled up," "passionate," or even "smitten" to champion them. Although a number of qualities could

generate passion, evaluators reported that cultural similarity was one of the most potent. Banker Vishal (Indian, male), who felt that his own background and soft-spoken manner were atypical of employees in his firm, illustrated this point:

> Only once have I been passionate enough about a candidate to fight for him. He came across as someone who didn't have the usual sort of confidence. . . . This guy was a bit shy but had a very strong drive to succeed. A lot of people were looking for a frat boy, you know, preppy, East Coast, private school. But I'm definitely not that and so I support people who don't fit the mold. . . . I loved him and I championed him.

The candidate received the job offer. The presence or absence of cultural similarities could thus yield affective advantages in addition to organizational and cognitive evaluative boosts.

ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTS

I have argued that cultural similarities between evaluators and applicants matter for employers' hiring decisions. Nevertheless, one must consider whether attraction produced by cultural similarities is simply a mask for sex or race homophily. There are several reasons to believe this is not the case. First, prior research demonstrates that controlling for the chance of being included in applicant pools, sex or race matches between job candidates and evaluators do not consistently drive hiring evaluations; effects range from positive to negative to nil (Huffcutt 2011). In the firms studied here, the majority of interview dyads consisted of whites evaluating other whites and males evaluating other males, yet cultural similarities were still highly salient bases of evaluation *within* same-sex and same-race dyads. Similarly, although the majority of interviewers at Holt were white or male, women and minorities were hired at higher rates than were white and male applicants (see Part III in the online

supplement). Second, perhaps because applicants were pre-screened for an elite university credential, sex, race, and experience were only loosely coupled in applicant pools. For example, at Holt, female professional school applicants were more likely than males to be competitive athletes or former investment bankers; ethnic minorities were more likely than whites to have attended Ivy League schools as undergraduates. Consequently, in this pool, selection on athletics was not tantamount to exclusion of females, and shared alma maters were not codes for ethnic exclusion. I am by no means suggesting that sex or racial discrimination or homophily do not occur in these firms. Rather, to understand labor market outcomes, it is necessary to consider not only similarities in sex and race between employers and candidates but also similarities in culture and experience.

One must also consider whether superior résumé qualifications rather than cultural similarities are driving evaluations. However, as noted earlier, research shows that employers' subjective impressions of candidates are most consequential for job interview evaluations; these impressions do not neatly correspond to applicants' résumé qualifications or cognitive skills (Graves and Powell 1995; Huffcutt 2011). Similarly, at Holt, résumé characteristics predicted neither interview evaluations nor decisions to hire (Rivera 2009).

Finally, one must consider whether employers use cultural similarities because applicant pools are so pre-screened that they have nothing left to differentiate candidates. Although they are a select group, graduating classes at elite universities—like other universities—display internal heterogeneity.[18] Given that the majority of students at top-tier undergraduate and professional schools typically apply to these firms, employers had bases other than cultural similarity on which to differentiate candidates. They could have screened more intensively on class rank, relevant coursework, related work experience, writing skills, standardized test performance, or demographic characteristics—applicants varied along these lines—but they did not

(Rivera 2011). Rather, employers prioritized cultural similarity because they saw it as a meaningful quality that fostered cohesion, signaled merit, and simply felt good. Although cultural similarities are more salient when gross differences in quality are minimized (Lamont 2009)—such as when employers create interview pools from résumés received, narrow a candidate long-list to a short-list, or make final hiring decisions—their use is not an artifact of having no alternative screening mechanisms. Moreover, understanding how employers make fine distinctions between candidates who pass a basic threshold of qualifications is crucial for knowing who is and is not ultimately hired into these organizations and who receives the material and symbolic resources these firms offer.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

My intent was not to develop a universal theory of hiring but rather to shed light on an under-examined dimension of the hiring process. Still, several scope conditions are necessary. First, evaluators do not choose their interviewees. We might see less emphasis on cultural similarities when evaluators (1) choose whom they interview, (2) have different structural opportunities to develop relationships with candidates (see Roth 2006), or (3) lack information about candidates other than what is visible. Future research should examine the degree to which gatekeepers use cultural similarities *after the point of hire* in promotion and compensation decisions, an endeavor not possible here. Other scholars have shown, however, that cultural similarities, especially sports, are salient sources of inclusion and exclusion once on the job (Erickson 1996; Roth 2006; Turco 2010). Second, evaluators interview candidates for positions below them. We might see more or less emphasis on cultural similarities for positions of equal or greater status. Third, given that cultural fit was strongest in firms that employed open-ended interviews, selection on cultural similarity should be tampered in

highly standardized or technical hiring evaluations. Finally, emphasizing cultural similarities may result in greater sex or race biases, than was the case in this study, when culture and demography are more tightly coupled (Turco 2010).

Although the specific types and relative importance of cultural similarities may vary between occupations, use of cultural similarities in hiring is unlikely an elite phenomenon only. Several studies hypothesizing that cultural similarities matter in hiring analyze low-wage, low-skill labor markets (Bills 1999; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991). Future research should analyze how the types and relative importance of cultural similarities in hiring vary between occupations.

CONCLUSIONS

Through a case study of elite professional service firms, I have argued that hiring is more than a process of skills sorting; it is also a process of cultural matching between candidates, evaluators, and firms. Cultural similarities influenced candidate evaluation in multiple, overlapping ways. Cultural fit was a formal evaluative criterion mandated by organizations and embraced by individual evaluators. Moreover, evaluators constructed and assessed merit in their own image, believing that culturally similar applicants were better candidates. Finally, evaluators implicitly gravitated toward and explicitly fought for candidates with whom they felt an emotional spark of commonality. Consequently, cultural reproduction (Bourdieu 1984) of these firms was in many ways over-determined, as organizational, cognitive, and affective processes reinforced one another to create new hire classes that mirrored firms' existing employees in cultural signals and lifestyle markers.

Implications for Research on Culture and Stratification

My findings extend work on culture and stratification beyond educational settings to demonstrate that cultural similarities between employers and job candidates matter in employer hiring, a hypothesis suggested but heretofore uninvestigated by sociologists. The fate of students with similar credentials in the competition for elite jobs was linked to their display of cultural signals; applicants whose experiences, leisure pursuits, and self-presentation styles matched those of employers could cash in these cultural similarities for jobs offering double to quadruple the salaries earned by other graduates from the same schools and for admission to a prestigious occupational group that serves as a gateway to the contemporary U.S. economic elite. Cultural similarity can thus be thought of as a form of capital that has economic conversion value (Bourdieu 1986) in labor markets, a proposition suggested but not previously demonstrated empirically (Bills 2003).

My results also inform debates about what types of cultural signals serve as currency in corporate settings and are salient for North American elites (Erickson 1996; Lamont 1992). Because candidates could not reliably predict whom they would be partnered with for evaluation, having an expansive cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) from which to draw to establish similarities with any interviewer seemed advantageous. Such results support Erickson's (1996) contention that within North American corporations, familiarity with a wide array of cultural forms matters more for advancement than does specialization in highbrow artistic forms (see also Turco 2010). However, my findings refine Erickson's argument in two important ways. First, although the particular cultural signals valued in elite firms were not highbrow or artistic, they did have important socioeconomic dimensions. Cultivation of leisure time is a hallmark of upper-middle-class cultures and of elites more generally (Lamont 1992; Veblen 1899). Moreover, evaluators tended to favor extracurricular activities associated with the white upper-middle class and that were acquired through intense, prolonged investment of material and temporal resources not only by job applicants but also by *their parents* (Rivera 2011; Shulman and Bowen

2001). Given that less affluent students are more likely than upper-middle-class students to believe that achievement in the classroom rather than on the field or in the concert hall matters most for future success and focus their energies accordingly (Bergerson 2007), the types of cultural similarities valued in elite firms' hiring processes had the potential to create inequalities in access to elite jobs based on parental socioeconomic status.

Second, mere familiarity with a cultural signal or activity was insufficient; as noted earlier, evaluators not only spot-checked candidates' participation in an activity to ensure it was genuine but also sought formal and intensive participation. Successful candidates therefore needed to possess enough cultural breadth to establish similarities with any professional with whom they were paired, but also enough depth in white, upper-middle-class cultural signals to relate to and excite their overwhelmingly white, upper-middle-class, Ivy League-educated interviewers. Such results suggest that both cultural variety and depth serve as important bases of economic and social distinction in North American corporate life. Additionally, they suggest that concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003) of children's extracurricular lives—a hallmark of U.S. white, upper-middle-class families—is not only a prerequisite for admission to America's most elite colleges (Stevens 2007), but also for entry to its highest paying entry-level jobs. Such findings are consistent with Veblen's (1899) hypothesis that conspicuous, intensive investment in leisure activities that are not directly useful is a powerful marker of elite status and a basis of economic stratification. Moreover, my findings suggest a social closure (Weber 1958) of elite occupations by cultural signals, particularly lifestyle markers associated with the white upper-middle class.

Implications for Hiring

Although human capital, social capital, and discrimination play critical roles in hiring, cultural signals also matter for employers' choices. Evaluators in my sample sought new

hires who were not only capable colleagues but also enjoyable playmates; interviewers often privileged their personal feelings of comfort, validation, and excitement over identifying candidates with superior cognitive or technical skills. In many respects, they hired in a manner more closely resembling the choice of friends or romantic partners than how sociologists typically portray employers selecting new workers. My results suggest that far from just error or discrimination, the residual terms of conventional sociological models of hiring also contain active cultural work by employers. Incorporating measures of applicants' and evaluators' cultural signals may help account for some unexplained variance in the decision to hire. Moreover, I go beyond demonstrating *that* cultural similarities matter in hiring and introduce three interpersonal processes through which they matter. These processes have the potential to inform future studies not only of hiring but also of interpersonal evaluation in organizations more broadly. Finally, my results call attention to the importance of analyzing socioeconomic inequalities in hiring.

Organizational Performance

Whether selecting on cultural similarities produces better or worse organizational performance is outside the scope of this article. However, just as culture simultaneously enables and constrains (Sewell 1992), the use of cultural similarities in hiring likely poses both benefits and challenges for organizations. These jobs require significant teamwork. Cultural similarities can facilitate trust and communication, but they can also reduce the attention team members pay to executing tasks and decision-making quality (Phillips et al. 2006). In the professional service context, emphasizing extracurricular similarities could increase employee enjoyment and attachment in the short-term. But given that these organizations require total work devotion (Blair-Loy 2003), selecting new hires based on extensive devotion to leisure could backfire in the long-term by resulting in a mismatch with the

actual demands of the job. Additionally, allowing evaluators the flexibility to define merit in their own image and select candidates who excite them personally could create conflicts between organizational and individual goals. Given that evaluators could potentially work closely with new hires, they might be motivated to hire the most enjoyable over the most competent candidates; that is, they may hire for themselves rather than for the organization. Although in some ways functional, how cultural similarity was defined and prioritized in these firms may have negative, unintended consequences. Future research should compare the effect of hiring based on similarity in work styles, which can be beneficial (Chatman 1991), versus play styles on organizational performance.

Diversity and Inequality

Selecting new hires based on cultural similarity represents a dual-edged sword that both enables and constrains (1) organizations' attempts to diversify and (2) opportunities for candidates from traditionally underrepresented groups in the competition for elite jobs. As demonstrated here, it can challenge traditional sex and racial inequalities by providing new opportunities for women and ethnic minorities who display the right stocks of cultural signals, as did many of the athletic, affluent, Ivy League-educated white and non-white women and men who were hired. However, the specific types of cultural similarities valued had a strong socioeconomic dimension and could create new inequalities by parental social class. Moreover, although culture, sex, and race were only loosely coupled in this population, the particular cultural signals desired did have a stereotypically gendered nature. Privileging such activities could indirectly disadvantage applicants—male or female—who held more stereotypically feminine leisure interests.

Finally, my study calls attention to the cultural dimensions of homophily and homosocial reproduction in organizations. Although these terms have become synonymous with sex- and race-based preferences in the sociological literature, my findings suggest a return to the original articulations of these concepts (Kanter 1977; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954), which also portray cultural similarities as important bases of attraction and stratification (see also Wimmer and Lewis 2010). I show that cultural homophily and cultural reproduction occur at the point of hire and introduce key interpersonal processes through which they do so. Thus, to fully understand hiring outcomes and inequalities, we must consider not only candidates' human capital, social capital, and demographic characteristics, but also the match between their displays of cultural signals and those of the gatekeepers evaluating them.

Notes

1. When culture does enter discussions of hiring, it typically does so in the form of employer stereotypes about demographic groups (Gorman 2005; Holzer 1999). Although stereotypes are important forms of culture, sociological understandings of culture have evolved beyond stereotypes and universal group values to include contextually specific styles, signals, and schemas, including the lifestyle markers analyzed here (Lamont and Small 2008).
2. Similarly, networks scholars have demonstrated interest in cultural similarities (Wimmer and Lewis 2010).
3. Race and sex can be important bases of perceived similarity; however, they are not consistently so, particularly in high-status work contexts (see Ely 1995).
4. See also Bills (1999) and Turco (2010).
5. Professional service firms are businesses—most commonly law, investment, and consulting firms—that sell customized advice to clients. Studies of

these firms include Gorman (2005), Roth (2006), and Turco (2010).

6. The most elite law schools are exceptions; career offices force firms to interview all applicants.

7. For information on the percentage of top-tier graduates who enter these industries, see Granfeld (1992) and Rampell (2011).

8. I identified firms based on national and major-market prestige rankings.

9. For a description of the hotel where Holt conducted interviews, see Part IV of the online supplement.

10. The next most common mechanisms in interviews were emotional response (code: emotion) and inferring merit from high-status activities (code: signaling). Signaling was the most common mechanism used in résumé screening. For an in-depth discussion of résumé screening, see Rivera (2011).

11. I use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

12. "Cultural fit" is a term used by employers rather than one I imposed.

13. The next most common criteria were interpersonal (i.e., polish or presence) and then analytic skills.

14. This literature characterizes culture at the individual level as stable personality traits and universal values (Rokeach 1979); sociologists have developed more nuanced conceptions of culture (Lamont and Small 2008).

15. Contrary to stereotypes of these firms, new hires display nontrivial sex and racial diversity (see Part III of the online supplement).

16. Although candidates varied in class rank, work experience, and demographic characteristics at this stage, employers were more likely to use extracurriculars to create interview pools (Rivera 2011).

17. Similarities could also yield disadvantages when increased knowledge provided discrediting information (e.g., "gut" academic majors). Similarity is risky to fake. People often react negatively to others who are inauthentic in their self-presentation (Lamont 2009). Evaluators reported spot-checking candidates' experiences to see if participation was genuine and extensive.

18. Cognitive ability is only one avenue for admission to elite universities (Shulman and Bowen 2001).

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